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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: LOCAL ELECTIONS NO BOON FOR GENDER EQUALITY

REF: ANKARA 125

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (U) This is a joint Embassy Ankara - Consulate General Istanbul cable.

¶2. (C) Summary: Few female candidates have been selected by political parties for March 29 local elections. Only 44 female candidates are among the thousands running in Turkey's mayoral races. Contacts from the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) told us that their polling demonstrates that females are not viable candidates in mayoral races. The headscarf taboo also appears to be a barrier, as no party wants to ignite this lightning rod issue by naming a headscarf-covered candidate to a prominent position. The parties do better in nominating female candidates for municipal assembly and village council races; AKP says it is on target to have women be one-third of its candidates for these races. KADER, a women's rights group that supports the institution of a national quota for female officials, told us male-dominated political party hierarchies are a strong impediment to female participation. Women also report the substantial financial sacrifice required as part of Turkey's "pay-to-play" political system as a significant barrier to entering politics. Reforming Turkey's gender equality glass ceiling is an immense challenge that will require a fundamental change in most Turks' beliefs about the inequality of men and women. All signs are that this will be a long road ahead. End summary.

Few Female Candidates

¶3. (C) Turkish voters go to the polls March 29 to select 16 metropolitan municipal mayors and approximately 3,000 mayors of smaller municipalities as well as members of municipal assemblies (reftel). Political parties have selected nearly all of their candidates, and the number of female candidates is alarmingly low. Parties have named a total of 11 female candidates to run for mayor in Turkey's 81 provincial capitals, and 33 female candidates to run in other mayoral races. AKP chose only one woman to run for mayor in one of the 81 provincial capitals; Republican People's Party (CHP) has thus far selected five; Democratic Party (DP) one, and pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) two. By nominating 15 mayoral candidates so far (two in the major cities; 13 in the smaller municipalities), DTP is continuing to propose more women for positions of power than any other party. But even in the unlikely case that most of the female

candidates win, Turkey will have made little improvement over the status quo: only 18 of 3225 mayors across the country are currently women. Although parties have not yet released the names of candidates for municipal assemblies and village councils, they are expected to follow the past practice of selecting relatively more female candidates for these less prominent positions.

Women's Rights Group Fighting Uphill Battle

¶14. (C) Hulya Gulbahar, President of KADER, a women's rights group that supports the institution of a national quota for female officials, told us at a January 14 lunch hosted by the Istanbul Consul General that as AKP and other parties have named their candidates, they have followed the historical pattern of naming female candidates to municipal assemblies and other positions of little import. Parties believe they "waste" money on women candidates who are perceived as weaker and less likely to win.

¶15. (SBU) Gulbahar told us that despite solid attendance at KADER's nine political training schools, there are several factors that continue to prevent the elevation of more women to higher office. Many women who attend KADER's training schools are reluctant to push for positions higher than that of muhtar (village headman). These women cite the financial demands of advancing in politics, especially at the local level, in Turkey.

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AKP Cites Unelectability of Women

¶16. (C) AKP Deputy Vice Chair Reha Denemec told us January 29 that AKP places great importance on the inclusion of women at all levels of the party. Women continue to play prominent roles at both the local and national level of AKP, and 17 percent of the 17,000 people who recently completed AKP's civics course to prepare for possible candidacy were women. He said that AKP is on track to meet PM Erdogan's stated goal of having one-third of all municipal assembly candidates be women. AKP had selected few female mayoral candidates because AKP's frequent polling throughout the country showed that females mayoral candidates are less competitive. AKP Central Disciplinary Board Chair Ismail Safi told us January 20 that relatively few women were named as mayoral candidates because "voters outside of big cities generally perceive men to be more capable of handling the type of work required to run a municipality." Both contacts told us that the perception that women are unelectable at the mayoral level demonstrates that Turkish society still possesses a male-chauvinist attitude toward women.

The "Lightning Rod" Headscarf Issue

¶17. (C) AKP contacts told us that there is no legal limitation on headscarved women participating in local politics, and the headscarf issue plays no role in limiting female political participation in municipal assemblies and village boards. Denemec said that in practice AKP and other parties have many headscarved politicians in municipal assemblies and village councils. However, at the mayoral level the headscarf "taboo" is a limiting factor, according to Denemec. He said that Turkey's "unwritten rules" guarantee that nominating a covered female mayoral candidate assures a contentious race that would attract national attention. AKP is not ready to push this "lightning rod" issue now, he explained.

¶18. (C) Hidayet Tuksel, the headscarf-covered President of the conservative Ankara Women's Platform, chided AKP and other

political parties for seeking to "avoid trouble" by failing to place more covered women on the ballot in critical races. Tuksel is organizing a series of hour-long sit-ins in front of AKP, MHP, and CHP to draw attention to the issue and to urge parties to "put their money where their mouth is" by naming more female candidates. Tuksel hopes this and a letter-writing campaign will influence the parties while they are still naming final candidates.

Comment

¶ 9. (C) The persistently low number of female candidates in March local elections is evidence of gender inequality in Turkish politics that reflects a wider problem of societal inequality between men and women. Despite AKP's purported resolve to improve this equation, the election figures suggest a worsening trend. A 2008 study by IRIS, an Ankara-based non-governmental organization, also highlights the diminishing number of women in the upper echelons of bureaucracy, noting that the percentage of women in governmental executive positions has declined from 15.1 percent in 1994 to 11.8 percent today. This problem is rooted in very basic educational and employment decisions. The illiteracy rate among women is 20 percent, while female workforce participation is 24 percent, the lowest of any OECD member. Political parties remain for the most part male-dominated hierarchical structures that are reluctant to push the envelope by naming female candidates for prominent races. Women have failed to unite behind charismatic female politicians, further impeding progress. Shattering Turkey's gender equality glass ceiling is a long-term prospect. Continued coaxing from the EU and international actors will help, but cannot substitute for the Turkish government at all levels initiating substantial educational and social reforms.

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